

AN INTERVIEW WITH INEZ SOLAGA:

A CONTRIBUTION TO A SURVEY OF LIFE AND STRUCTURES ON THE COMSTOCK

Interviewee: Inez Solaga

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Description

Inez Solaga, the daughter of Italian immigrant parents, was born in Virginia City in 1916. Her father was employed by the Virginia & Truckee Railroad from 1909 to 1939. Inez Solaga graduated from the Fourth Ward School in 1934. She worked for the Comstock Wood and Coal Company and the Storey County Recorder's office, and from 1971 to 1978 she was the recorder and auditor for Storey County.

In this oral history, Mrs. Solaga shares memories of Virginia City and of life on the Comstock from 1920 to 1960. She discusses buildings in Virginia City and gives observations on the changing economic base of the area.

AN INTERVIEW WITH INEZ SOLAGA

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A CONTRIBUTION TO A SURVEY OF
LIFE AND STRUCTURES ON THE COMSTOCK**

PREPARED FOR THE STOREY COUNTY, NEVADA
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An Oral History Conducted by Lucy Scheid
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University of Nevada Oral History Program

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PREFACE TO THE DIGITAL EDITION

Established in 1964, the University of Nevada Oral History Program (UNOHP) explores the remembered past through rigorous oral history interviewing, creating a record for present and future researchers. The program's collection of primary source oral histories is an important body of information about significant events, people, places, and activities in twentieth and twenty-first century Nevada and the West.

The UNOHP wishes to make the information in its oral histories accessible to a broad range of patrons. To achieve this goal, its transcripts must speak with an intelligible voice. However, no type font contains symbols for physical gestures and vocal modulations which are integral parts of verbal communication. When human speech is represented in print, stripped of these signals, the result can be a morass of seemingly tangled syntax and incomplete sentences—totally verbatim transcripts sometimes verge on incoherence. Therefore, this transcript has been lightly edited.

While taking great pains not to alter meaning in any way, the editor may have removed false starts, redundancies, and the “uhs,” “ahs,” and other noises with which speech is often liberally sprinkled; compressed some passages which, in unaltered form, misrepresent the chronicler's meaning; and relocated some material to place information in its intended context. Laughter is represented with [laughter] at the end of a sentence in which it occurs, and ellipses are used to indicate that a statement has been interrupted or is incomplete...or that there is a pause for dramatic effect.

As with all of our oral histories, while we can vouch for the authenticity of the interviews in the UNOHP collection, we advise readers to keep in mind that these are remembered pasts, and we do not claim that the recollections are entirely free of error. We can state, however, that the transcripts accurately reflect the oral history recordings on which they were based. Accordingly, each transcript should be approached with the

same prudence that the intelligent reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries, and other sources of historical information. All statements made here constitute the remembrance or opinions of the individuals who were interviewed, and not the opinions of the UNOHP.

In order to standardize the design of all UNOHP transcripts for the online database, most have been reformatted, a process that was completed in 2012. This document may therefore differ in appearance and pagination from earlier printed versions. Rather than compile entirely new indexes for each volume, the UNOHP has made each transcript fully searchable electronically. If a previous version of this volume existed, its original index has been appended to this document for reference only. A link to the entire catalog can be found online at <http://oralhistory.unr.edu/>.

For more information on the UNOHP or any of its publications, please contact the University of Nevada Oral History Program at Mail Stop 0324, University of Nevada, Reno, NV, 89557-0324 or by calling 775/784-6932.

Alicia Barber
Director, UNOHP
July 2012

ORIGINAL PREFACE

The University of Nevada Oral History Program (OHP) engages in systematic interviewing of persons who can provide firsthand descriptions of events, people and places that give history its substance. The products of this research are the tapes of the interviews and their transcriptions.

In themselves, oral history interviews are not history. However, they often contain valuable primary source material, as useful in the process of historiographical synthesization as the written sources to which historians have customarily turned. Verifying the accuracy of all of the statements made in the course of an interview would require more time and money than the OHP's operating budget permits. The program can vouch that the statements were made, but it cannot attest that they are free of error. Accordingly, oral histories should be read with the same prudence that the reader exercises when consulting government records, newspaper accounts, diaries and other sources of historical information.

It is the policy of the OHP to produce transcripts that are as close to verbatim

as possible, but some alteration of the text is generally both unavoidable and desirable. When human speech is captured in print the result can be a morass of tangled syntax, false starts and incomplete sentences, sometimes verging on incoherency. The type font contains no symbols for the physical gestures and the diverse vocal modulations that are integral parts of communication through speech. Experience shows that totally verbatim transcripts are often totally unreadable and therefore a total waste of the resources expended in their production. While keeping alterations to a minimum the OHP will, in preparing a text:

- a. generally delete false starts, redundancies and the uhs, ahs and other noises with which speech is often liberally sprinkled;

- b. occasionally compress language that would be confusing to the reader in unaltered form;

- c. rarely shift a portion of a transcript to place it in its proper context; and

- d. enclose in [brackets] explanatory information or words that were not uttered

but have been added to render the text intelligible.

There will be readers who prefer to take their oral history straight, without even the minimal editing that occurred in the production of this text; they are directed to the tape recording.

Copies of all or part of this work and the tape recording from which it is derived are available from:

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INTRODUCTION

Born in Virginia City 1916, Inez Solaga is the daughter of Italian immigrant parents. Her father was employed by the Virginia & Truckee Railroad from 1909 to 1939. Shortly before her birth the family moved from American Flat to Virginia City, which became their permanent residence. Inez graduated from the Fourth Ward School in 1934. She has worked for the Comstock Wood and Coal Company and the Storey County Recorder's office, and from 1971 to 1978 she was the recorder and auditor for Storey County.

In this 1984 interview with Lucy Scheid, Mrs. Solaga shares memories of Virginia City and of life on the Comstock, 1920-1960. She discusses several important buildings and offers some observations on the changing economic base of the area. The reader should be aware that Inez Solaga's brother, John Giuffra, has also contributed an interview to this series.



INEZ SOLAGA

1984

AN INTERVIEW WITH INEZ SOLAGA

Lucy Scheid: Where were you born, Inez?

Inez Solaga: I was born in Virginia City, Nevada.

Before you lived in this house, you lived in another house. Could you tell me what that house looked like?

It was a one-storey house, and I think it had about 5 rooms in it.

There were a lot of houses in this area before. What happened to them?

Most of the houses burned down during the fire in 1942. There was a fire started on what is called the Divide, and it burned 26 houses that evening. It burned as far as the Fourth Ward School and a short distance up Mount Davidson. Then it also started a fire across the hill over near the Combination shaft. The reason this house didn't burn was because a fireman came over here and brought

a fire hose, and my father and brother kept it hosed down all the time the fire was going on.

How many houses were on the Divide?

Thirty-two.

How long have you lived in Virginia City?

Sixty-seven years.

And you were born at home in your other house in Virginia City, next door to this house?

Yes.

What is your father's name, and when did he come to this country?

Enrico Giuffra. He came from Italy in about the year 1906 to work at the building of the Derby Dam. That's just out of Reno. Then he went back to Italy and married my mother, and then they came over here in 1909

to Lakeview, Nevada. Lakeview is about 2 or 3 miles out of Carson City.

Why did he come to the United States from Italy?

Well, he had a brother over here, living at Lakeview, and the wages were a lot better over here.

What did he do in Italy?

He was doing farm work.

Then at Derby Dam, he did construction there?

I don't know what his work was...probably just a laborer.

And then he came to Lakeview to work on the Virginia & Truckee Railroad?

Yes, on the V & T Railroad, and worked as laborer on the track parts, maintaining the tracks.

What is your mother's name, and what did she do most of her life?

Chiara Giuffra. She was always a housewife.

How old was your father when he came to the United States?

He was about 30 years old.

After Lakeview, he went to American Flat to work?

Yes. He was transferred to American Flat.

Do you remember anything about how American Flat looked at that time?

I wasn't even born....

How did it look when you were growing up?

What I remember about it is my mother and father talking about it—what was down there. There were several residents there, and then later on there was the American Flat mill.

When was that built?

I think around in 1920s.

How long did that mill run?

I don't remember how long that was. I don't remember too much about American Flat.

So you didn't really live there?

No.

Your father just worked there?

Yes. I wasn't even born then. My brother was born then.

And you were born in 1916?

Yes. I have an older brother who's passed away now. He was born there at Lakeview—Albert Giuffra. And when my folks lived at American Flat, my brother John was born there. They lived in American Flat, I think, around 4, 5 years. Then they moved up to Virginia City.

What did your dad do in American Flat?

He continued working for the Virginia & Truckee Railroad.

Doing maintenance on the tracks?

Yes.

Do you know how much he was paid a day?

I think around \$3.50 per day.

What can you tell me about the houses in American Flat?

I don't remember them.

What games did you play when you were a child?

Let's see. Oh, we played jump rope, hop scotch, hide and go seek. Then we played with dolls. [laughter]

Did you play outside?

We played out in our yard here.

Did you ever go ice skating on the Divide?

No, I didn't go up there ice skating.

Where did you go to school?

I went to school at the Fourth Ward School in Virginia City.

How did you go to school? Which way did you walk?

It was all dirt road from the front of our house, and we just walked the dirt road over to the Fourth Ward School. Then there was kind of a big drop off there on this road....

Could you tell me what the inside of the Fourth Ward School looked like?

There were wood and coal stoves [and] the old-fashioned desks. Let's see, there was a gymnasium up on the top floor, and they also had a sewing and economic room, and we had a chemistry room. Then the bottom part was grammar classrooms. There were 4 storeys; the high school was on the third floor.

So the classes weren't mixed. You didn't have kindergarten in with the high school or anything like that?

No. It was all just from first through the twelfth.

Who were your teachers? Do you remember any of them?

I had Kate Quirk, Jenny Somers, George Gadda, Mr. Tapscott, Mr. John Gilmartin, Mr. Jake Lawlor, Mr. Nash Morgan, Jacqueline Tuttle, Mr. Clarence Shedd.

How many students were in your classroom?

It varied ...about 10 to 15. They weren't very big classes.

What year did you graduate from high school?

Nineteen thirty-four.

And how many were in your graduating class?

Ten.

What subjects did you study when you were going to school?

Spelling, arithmetic, English, all general subjects. Then later on in high school, we took algebra, English, Spanish, typing [and] bookkeeping.

Do you know who built the Geiger Grade road?

I don't know who built it.

Where did you hang out as a teenager?

Oh, we used to go down to the National Guard Hall to the shows. And we used to go to the Crystal.

What did you do in the Crystal?

We had ice cream or milk shakes.

So it wasn't a bar then? It was an ice cream parlor at that time?

It was a bar at that time, but it was a fountain, too. They still have the fountain there. We always got ice cream or sundaes...milkshakes. Also, it had candy—a large variety of candy.

What was at the National Guard building that you went there?

That's where they had the basketball games, and we went to that a lot. Oh, dances, and that's all I went to.

What did the building look like? It was a really big building then if it had basketball in there? Do you know where it was located?

Yes, it was a big building near the fire museum, between the Wagon Wheel and the fire museum. They tore it down.

What else did you do?

I used to ride horseback a lot. We had our 2 horses and I loved to ride horses. And, what else...going to basketball games, going to movies.

Where were the movies?

Where Grandma's Fudge store is now.

Did you ever go roller skating in Piper's Opera House?

No. I didn't.

You didn't go to the movies there at Piper's?

No. No.

What was that theater at Grandma's Fudge called?

Just Virginia Theater. We used to go to the dances at [the] National Guard Hall. That was fun.

How often were the dances held?

Just whenever an occasion came up.

Like a Halloween dance or Christmas dance?

Yes. The basketball games; that's for sure. We went to all the basketball games.

What was the basketball team called?

The Muckers.

How many grocery stores were in Virginia City in 1934 when you graduated from high school?

I remember 2 grocery stores. One was owned by Paul Giraudo, and also the Virginia Market. Paul Giraudo's grocery store was on the north part of town near the Assay Office.

And then the other grocery store was...?

It was close to the post office.

And how many people were living in Virginia City in 1934?

I'd say about 300 to 350.

Were the mines still running in the 1930s?

Yes. Some mines were running. Then they also had open-pit mining.

Do you know how many mining companies were in Virginia City at that time?

There was one here right in Virginia City.

Then the other ones were just scattered around the Comstock?

Yes.

Did most of the men work in the mines?

Yes, they were still working.

Besides miners, what other occupations did people have in Virginia City in the 1930s?

I think mostly mining during those days. It was pretty quiet during the 1930s. Until 1950 [or] 1952, when Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg came here to town.

And what did they do for the town?

They opened the *Territorial Enterprise* and also, I think the "Bonanza" [television show] had quite a bit to do with it. Tourists started to come in. A lot of people watched that show on TV, and I think that attracted a lot of people. With the *Enterprise*—that newspaper [had a] big circulation then.

So it didn't circulate just in Virginia City?

No, [but] in the United States, and I think in foreign countries.

So Lucius Beebe and Charles Clegg were kind of telling everybody about Virginia City essentially?

Yes.

What did Virginia City look like in the 1950s?

It was pretty quiet in those days. It picked up, I think, in the early 1970s.

So in the 1950s the people started coming to Virginia City to visit, and tourism really started in the 1970s?

Yes. It picked up pretty good around the 1970s, but I think more now in the early 1980s; more people, more growth and more business. More tourists coming in here.

How many people were living here in the 1950s?

Three hundred [or] 350. In the last 10 years it's grown a lot.

What kind of people have moved into Virginia City in the last years? I understand there's a lot of artists who moved in?

Yes. We have a lot of artists. And we have people who live here but commute to work in Reno, Carson.

Going back to the 1930s, I heard a rumor that there was a person who was burning down the buildings because he didn't like them. Is that true? Do you ever remember hearing anything like that?

No, I don't.

How many buildings were in town? In the 1930s were there a lot of buildings still left from the Comstock era? Or were most of them gone?

No, a lot of them were gone. They were either burned down or torn down.

Burned down in the fires, or burned down purposely by people?

Both. Some of them were by the fires, and then some of them were in really bad shape and [we] had to tear them down.

Most people were mining in the 1930s?

There were some mines working. Then in the 1940s, they closed the mines down because they wanted the men to go into defense work. That was during World War II.

How many people were here in the town then? Still 300?

Yes, it was around there.

What happened after the mines shut down? What did people do then for work?

A lot of them moved away from here. Then the rest of us just kept the town going. [laughter] Just stuck it out.

What did those people do who stayed?

Well, they had to work outside of town.

So they didn't work in Virginia City? They commuted?

A lot of them didn't; a lot of them had to commute to Reno or Carson.

What was in Reno or Carson? Were they big towns, then?

Pretty good, yes.

Where did you buy your clothes in the 1930s? Did you go to Carson to buy them or did you have stores here in Virginia City?

No, we used to send away in the catalogue: Montgomery Ward [or] Sears.

Was Roos Atkins here in the 1930s, or had it moved away by then?

Moved.

So there were no clothing stores here?

They had a few things at Paul Giraudo's store. [It was] like a general merchandise store.

How many restaurants were here in the 1930s and 1940s?

I would say about 4 or 5.

How many hotels were here?

About 3 or 4. There wasn't too much doing in the 1930s.

Then in the 1940s everyone went to war?

Yes, a lot of the men went to work in the defense work. Then a lot of them were drafted into the service.

And then the women and men who stayed commuted to Carson and Reno because there was no work in Virginia City at that time?

Yes.

In the 1930s or 1940s, where did you go for medical help? Who was your doctor?

We had one doctor here; Dr. Ross had an office here.

Then if you were really sick you had to go to Carson?

Yes, to Carson or Reno.

So the mines stopped running and were shut down when the war started?

Yes.

Do you know when the red light district was torn down?

I don't know exactly, but I think around sometime in the 1930s.

Why were those houses torn down?

I don't know the reason why.

What kinds of jobs were available in Carson City when the mines shut down and people started commuting to work?

They went to Carson and Reno and worked state jobs there.

Do you remember the Con-Virginia mine fire?

No, I don't remember that.

Did you ever meet Lucius Beebe?

I never met him. I just know who he was.

Were there many tourist attractions in the 1950s or was there just the Territorial Enterprise?

They didn't have too many shops then. They have a lot more shops now and museums to go see.

When did all the museums and the shops start?

I think about 1965. They started a little at a time. People came in to buy these museums and open up all these shops. Most of them have been in the last 10 years.

Why do you think that they started doing that?

I think [because] of the history of the town. The tourists like to see just what Virginia City looked like and [learn] the history of the town.

Tell me about your job as Storey County recorder. When did you get that job?

Well, I started out as a deputy there in 1966. Then in 1966 to 1971 I worked there as a deputy. Then [in] 1971 I ran for county recorder, and I served 2 terms—1971 through 1978. I retired in January 1979.

What was your job as deputy?

There were only 2 of us in the office; we had to do just about everything: typing, recording, book work and bookkeeping.

Then as Storey County recorder, did you do the same work?

[The] Storey County recorder [does] just about the same thing.

What did you do most of your life before you became deputy?

I worked. After I finished Reno Business College, I came back up here to Virginia City, and I worked as the clerk in the Comstock Wood and Coal office. Most of the houses here had wood and coal stoves.

Did people have electricity, too?

Yes, we had electricity, but most of the houses had wood and coal stoves then. So I was a clerk in the office there. I worked in the Comstock Wood and Coal office several years, and then I went up to the Court House to work as a typist in the district attorney's office and the county clerk's office.

How long did your father work on the V & T?

He started in 1909 and then he worked till he retired in 1939. That's when they closed the railroads up here in Virginia City.

Do you know who started the tourist bureau?

No.

Did you see any changes as recorder as the town got bigger?

When I first went there, there wasn't too much work to do. But then, as the town grew, there was more work.

Were there a lot of people moving in from other parts of the country or the state?

Yes. People moved in to the Virginia City Highlands, and also down at Mark Twain; they have houses and mobile units down there.

When did all these people start moving in?

I think it was around 1960s.

Someone told me Virginia City was a really inexpensive place to live. Is that true?

Yes, I think so. I think now it's just getting as expensive as anywhere else. I think the rent is cheaper here than in Reno and Carson.

But it looks a lot different now, too. A lot of old houses seem to be gone.

A lot of houses have been torn down. But I think the town looks a lot better now.

Oh, you do? Why?

Because people are taking care of their residences more and they're painting, fixing up their houses and places of business and taking care of their places better.

Yes. I saw some pictures of the Savage Mansion, and it looked like a mess. It was all unpainted and was falling apart and everything.

Oh, yes, it was [in] pretty bad shape.

Who lived in it then in the 1930s?

A family by the name of Lewis used to live there then. It wasn't open for tourists; it was just used as a residence.

Did you know the family?

Yes. I went to school with their 2 girls. We were in the same grade, and I used to go over to their house.

Did most of your friends move away from Virginia City, or are they still here?

A few of them moved away, and some are still here. I didn't have a very big class....

A graduating class of 10 you said?

Yes, that's all.

How many people were in your whole school in 1934?

I would say around 100.

When were the other schools built?

Fourth Ward [closed] in 1936. And they built the new school; it was also a high school and grammar school. Then they built a new grammar school; I think it was in the 1970s. It's on D Street, close to the high school.

Was the First Ward School still standing when you were going to school?

I don't remember a First Ward School. We didn't go over there, but they had a school over there, too, that was called the First Ward School. That's on the other end of town...the north end of town.

So most all the kids went to the Fourth Ward School?

Well, it was divided, the Fourth Ward and the First Ward.

So there were districts?

Yes.

So all the kids that lived on the south end of town. ...

I think went up here to Fourth Ward. And then all the north end went to the First Ward.

Tell me about the Savage Mansion?

A man named Gerald Harwood was the one that repaired the Savage Mansion. [The Lewis family] moved out of it, and [Harwood] came here in about the 1960s.

In the 1960s were there a lot of people coming in buying shops?

Gradually. It didn't just happen all at one time; it just gradually rebuilt. And people took more interest in their homes, and I think now it looks a lot better.

So some of the families that were the old Comstock families like the Gallaghers and the Markses had their businesses; the Markses ran their saloon, the Crystal Bar. And the other families commuted to jobs in Carson and Reno?

Yes. There were some jobs here. Not too many. Some worked on the Virginia & Truckee Railroad. And some worked on the train.

Was this in 1939? I thought in 1939 the V & T closed?

Well, early 1930s.

And then, in the 1940s people mostly worked in Carson or Reno?

Yes. Then there was some open-pit mine work here, in the 1930s. I remember when I was going to school, they were working up here by the Fourth Ward School in open-pit mining.

Were there buildings there then; was the pit below the Fourth Ward or above the Fourth Ward?

It's across the street. Well, it's not directly across the street. You've seen Mount Davidson, there? All that open-pit work there?

Yes.

That's it. There were truck drivers and machine equipment operators, like shovels and bulldozers working there.

PHOTOGRAPHS



Storey County Courthouse
Mrs. Solaga was county recorder from 1971-1978



Solaga house “didn’t burn (during the Divide Fire) because... my father and brother kept it hosed down all the time the fire was going on.”

Photographs by N. J. Broughton

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